

Res Cogitans

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 24

7-30-2011

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Recommended Citation

Kovaka, Karen (2011) "Transcendental Geology: The Relation between Nature and History in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology," *Res Cogitans*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 24.

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Transcendental Geology: The Relation between Nature and History in Merleau-Ponty's Ontology

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Published online: 30 July 2011
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Abstract

In his lecture course on Nature, Merleau-Ponty makes the intriguing claim that an ontology of Nature is the preferred way toward ontology in general. This paper explores why he makes this claim and asks what philosophical significance this approach to ontology might have. Making use of Merleau-Ponty's notions of chiasm and flesh as the most fundamental ontological truths, I argue that nature and history are related to one another according to the logic of the chiasm and that thinking them in terms of this relationship opens up avenues for addressing long-standing problems in both philosophy of nature and philosophy of history. Specifically, I explore Merleau-Ponty's response to the problem of a scientific historical methodology that is distinct from the methodology of the natural sciences and suggest that his response, in its reliance on the logic of chiasm, moves the problem beyond the state it reached in the work of Wilhem Dilthey and Edmund Husserl.

'Nature as a leaf or layer of total Being – the ontology of Nature as the way toward ontology – the way that we prefer because the evolution of the concept of Nature is a more convincing propaedeutic, [since it] more clearly shows the necessity of the ontological mutation. We will show how the concept of Nature is always the expression of an ontology – and its privileged expression.' (Merleau-Ponty, *Nature*, 204)

Why is the ontology of nature the way toward ontology in general? And why, in turn, is a history of the 'evolution' of nature as a philosophical concept the way toward the ontology of nature? This paper seeks to understand the significance of historical-philosophical reflection on nature to Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the visible and invisible. The answer to this question lies in two ideas. First, if we assume the validity of Merleau-Ponty's ontology as presented in *The Visible and the Invisible*, we find that a relation of chiasm obtains between nature and history. Second, if we think nature and history in terms of this relation, we find ourselves provided with a fruitful approach to apprehending the meaning of both.

The question that focuses Merleau-Ponty's later philosophical work is that of chiasm as the fundamental ontological insight. We understand chiasm as 'the self-mediating reconversion of transcendence and immanence' (VI 90), as continual reversibility between what is given and what is not, the reflective and the unreflected, structure and signification, the visible and the invisible. The secret of being does not ultimately rest in the things which enter *into* this relation; in fact, this direction of thought leads to incoherence, it cannot provide a satisfactory account of things. One of the great lessons phenomenology has drawn from the history of philosophy is that the assumption of the primacy of things is flawed precisely because it is impossible to pin down what things *are* while at the same time operating under the assumption that being is centered in things. Instead, being rests in the *movement* of the chiasm, the way being folds back over itself and how, in the moment of its crossing, reveals a stuff that is neither material nor spiritual, but which Merleau-Ponty calls 'flesh.'

[F]lesh is an ultimate notion... ...a relation of the visible with itself that traverses me and constitutes me as a seer, this circle which I do not form, which forms me, this coiling over of the visible upon the visible...' (IV 140). Flesh is a meaning relation, but not an intellectual one. It is not matter, but neither is it thought, because it is a relation that involves tangibility and visibility. As an ultimate notion, the structure of flesh is also the structure underlying and manifested in the world and ourselves. What we perceive as things or objects are the coming to sensible expression of chiasmic intertwining; everything we encounter is somehow shot through with this relation. 'What exists are not present "things" or forces but systems of differential relationships in an ongoing process of integration, disintegration and reformulation' (Toadvine 33).

Given flesh, given these relational systems, how is 'the concept of Nature' related to ontology, and why might it be the 'privileged expression?' Why do we treat nature, and thus ontology, historically, through studying the evolution of the concept? These are the questions which find their answers in the chiasm between nature and history. We must begin by seeing what Merleau-Ponty means by 'Nature.' One of the implications of the idea of flesh is that meaning does not require sentience before it can exist; rather, it can exist beneath thought. There is unreflected meaning that lies within the sensible, constituting the sensible. This unreflected meaning is the starting point for understanding nature. 'Nature is what has a meaning without this meaning being posited by thought' (*Nature* 3).

It is also what underlies all of our experiences of perception, reflection, etc. Expanding on a remark of Husserl's in 'Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature,' Merleau-Ponty distinguishes 'the Earth' as a horizon within which we are given everything else. It is the 'soil of our experience' (Husserl's words), 'not an object among other objects but the living stock from which the objects are engendered' (*Nature* 77). As an overarching concept or horizon of experience,

nature is ‘a carrier of all the possible’ (*Nature* 77), an entity that is the originary source of any sentient reflection concerning it.

The meaningful sensible of nature must then exceed any attempts to reflect upon it, because it is both the point from which we begin and that toward which reflection is oriented. This aspect of nature captures the trait of simultaneous transcendence and immanence which first Husserl and then Merleau-Ponty understood as an essential characteristic of all perception (and, consequently, reflection, as it arises from perception). Sentient reflection on nature is ‘ontologically continuous’ with nature, springing as it does from the ‘soil,’ the ‘Earth,’ and yet, the ‘unreflective – in a word, nature – remains for the personal self a prehistory, an irrecoverable past’ (Toadvine 132). Reflection, in taking up nature, is dealing with something ontologically related to itself, but the reverse of this immanence is the transcendence, or inexhaustibility, that is also in reflection on nature, and it is this transcendence which preserves reflection from being tautological or identical to nature at every point.

So far we have talked of nature as the unreflective, but the emergence of reflection *on* the unreflective, sentient meaning doubling back on itself to explore its history (sensible meaning), introduces a paradox. Our mode of access to nature is reflection. We bring the unreflective to light by applying reflection to it. However, if the way in which the unreflected is expressed is necessarily through reflection, then mediation is a condition for understanding nature, and direct access is impossible. This means, first, that at any given moment, the meaningful sensible of nature is flowing into the meaningful sentient of human life which is its expression, and, second, that the effort of the ‘doubling back’ of reflection to join itself to its originary source must always be incomplete. Reflection, through reflection, cannot seamlessly rejoin the unreflected that is its beginning.

And yet, though a seamless rejoining is impossible, there is reversibility between reflection and the unreflective. Not only does nature flow into human reflection, but there is also a kind of doubling back again of reflection upon nature because in the act of reflecting we are seeking a kind of passage from sentient meaning back to sensible meaning: ‘We are looking for the primordial, non-lexical meaning always intended by people who speak of nature’ (*Nature* 3). Reflection, in trying to ‘return’ in this way, discloses a crucial moment in which lies the being of both reflection *and* nature. It moves through and in time, in order to circle back to nature, finding that:

‘...this self-rending movement of expression is not a potentiality of the human subject so much as an event of nature itself, of its own duplicity, which entails that our “alienation” from nature, if this word has any sense, can only be a moment of nature’s own self-unfolding expression through us’ (Toadvine 132-3).

This expression of nature, happening as it does in and through time, is historical. Reflection inescapably happens in history, is historical in its being, yet is also reversible back to the unreflective. Human thought and activity in history, even as it moves forwards and differentiates itself from nature, also seeks to re-enter that from which it came, to understand the secret of its originary meaning. The motivation for history begins in nature, in prehistory, and the continued movement of history receives its force from the effort to fold the sentient back over to meet and apprehend the sensible. One could understand natural scientific thought and technological advancement, for example, as thoroughly historical and reflective events which find their meaning and movement in their desire to plumb the depths of the unreflective (nature) that is their 'soil.' Therefore, what happens between nature and history, the movement from one to the other which is constitutive and expressive of both – this movement is precisely that of crossing, is a chiasm.

This analysis of nature and its meaning as the unreflected, or meaningful sensible, along with its passage into a reflection which is necessarily historical is sufficient to show that within a world structured by chiasm, it is a relation of chiasm that obtains between nature and history. Now it remains to work out the implications of this relationship for both nature and history, to see how this manner of thinking directs and bears fruit for philosophical thinking. There are many philosophical problems to which the above analysis applies, including the problem of how to define nature and the meaning of the ways in which the Western tradition has struggled to fashion such a definition. However, the one problem I will focus on is a historical one. I will trace a question which was important in neo-Kantian German thought, next examined in Husserl, and finally taken up by Merleau-Ponty in the working notes of *The Visible and the Invisible*. This is the problem of the study of history possessing scientific validity while not needing to operate in a way that is methodologically parallel to the natural sciences.

I will begin with the neo-Kantian Wilhelm Dilthey's work on this problem. Dilthey saw history (and the human sciences in general) as directed toward capturing important moments in the flow of the 'nexus of life' [*Lebenszusammenhang*], by which he meant a web-like continuity between nature and psychic life. Due to the fleeting nature of experience, the human sciences are tasked with working to relate human life back to this nexus, 'back to a creative, evaluative, and active source, something that expresses and objectifies itself' (Dilthey 109). Their goal is to come to an understanding of the invisible contours of life from within. Dilthey wants the human sciences to be scientific, but recognizes that because their orientation is different from the orientation of the natural sciences, and so must their method be. Rather than beginning from a hypothetical basis as do the natural sciences, the human sciences as Dilthey understands them must begin and remain rooted in lived experience [*Erlebnis*]. Their efforts to

study the nexus of life will not be successful if they postulate for theoretical purposes a discontinuity between the psychical and the physical as the natural sciences do. This is because there is no experiential basis for seeing such discontinuity in the nexus of life. A study that begins from this abstraction already distances itself from the nexus of life and will not be able to get at the real object of its inquiry. However, this condition introduces a tension which Dilthey does not resolve. How can the human sciences be scientific when carried out by historical persons who purposely begin from their own lived experiences which are determined by their own particular historical horizons? In the paradigm which he creates, Dilthey's own philosophical and historical assertions are merely expressions of life which have their place amongst the interconnected systems that form the socio-historical nexus but do not constitute an Archimedean point from which to make universal statements about the essence of the human sciences.

Husserl, in reading Dilthey, paid close attention to this problem and attempted to move beyond it in formulating his own philosophy of history in *The Crisis* and in his essay 'The Origin of Geometry.' In these works, the solution to the dilemma of the scientificity of the human sciences (especially history) is that reflection upon these sciences discloses an a priori structure always already operating in our experience of and reflection on history. 'The historical horizon...has its essential structure that can be revealed through methodological inquiry' (Husserl 369). What this structure consists of is bound up in Husserl's metaphor of sedimentation, a metaphor that Merleau-Ponty continues to make use of in *The Visible and the Invisible*. He tells us that 'history is from the start nothing other than the vital movement of the coexistence and the interweavings of original formations and sedimentations of meaning' (Husserl 371).

'The Origin of Geometry' leaves the structure of history undefined and unexplored, however, and in the end, Husserl's contention that reflection upon history can uncover the a priori structure of history is still susceptible to a critique. The trouble is not that there is no a priori structure to discover; Husserl has given us an account of structure that moves us beyond the formulation of the issue in Dilthey. However, it is still difficult to see how reflection is equipped to discover this structure. The essence of reflection is mediation. How then can reflection penetrate back through sedimented layers of meaning to disclose the structure of history? Reflection must add more and more layers to history in its attempts to double back and access the structure of what lies beneath it. In other words, the tension that emerges here is the same tension that characterizes the chiasm between reflection and the unreflective.

Merleau-Ponty has this difficulty in mind in his discussion of history and philosophy in the working notes to *The Visible and the Invisible*. His idea for moving forward relies on the chiasm between nature and history. He formulates the problem by talking about the history of philosophy and asking if it is necessary to distinguish between the views that past philosophers took of their own problems and the ways in which we understand

their problems in retrospect. Can there be continuity in philosophy if we understand the questions of past philosophers differently than they understood them? His answer is, ‘Not if the philosophies in their integrality are a *question*, the interrogative thought which makes them speak is not overcome by what comes later’ (199). We can trace the structural development of something like philosophy through time if there is a questioning moving through philosophy at all times which allows thinking at a later time to be faithful to the projects and problems of previous times.

‘There is but one solution: show that there is transcendence, to be sure, between the philosophies, not reduction to one unique plane, but that, in this plane, staggered out in depth, they nevertheless refer to one another, it is nevertheless a question of the same Being – show between the philosophies a perceptual relation or relation of transcendence. Hence, a vertical history, which has its rights along the “objective” history of philosophy...’ (VI 185-6).

This idea of continuity of questioning through time is similar in structure to the passing of the sensible meaning into sentient meaning – the logic of chiasm permeates them both. Nature has doubled over itself to produce history, and the process of history is a continuation of this doubling over in order to move forward. I said before that the movement from nature to history is reversible, that the march of history finds its motivation in its desire to re-enter the mute sensible which generated it. So, consistency to the logic of the chiasm requires not only a continuity of questioning through time, but that this continuity also be a folding back over which seeks to complete the circle of its reflection, all the while finding that a certain failure, or alienation, is the very condition for its being. This is, in fact, the next step Merleau-Ponty takes in his notes.

He works to show that a structural philosophy of history such as he is outlining must circle back to nature, and that the crossing of history and nature is what resolves the problems which both Dilthey and Husserl deal with in their works. Near the very end of the notes for *The Visible and the Invisible* he talks about a philosophical account of history as a philosophy of structure, one which may be better understood in terms of geography than in terms of history:

‘Whereas geography – or rather: the Earth as *Ur-Arche* brings to light the carnal *Urhistorie* (Husserl – *Umsurtz*...) In fact it is a question of grasping the *nexus* – neither “historical” nor “geographic” of history and transcendental geology, this very time that is space, this very space that is time, which I will have rediscovered by my analysis of the visible and the flesh, the simultaneous *Urstiftung* of time and space which makes there be a historical landscape and a quasi-geographical inscription of history. Fundamental problem: the sedimentation and the reactivation’ (VI 258).

Here Merleau-Ponty references Husserl's concepts of sedimentation and reactivation which are so important to 'The Origin of Geometry.' How this sedimentation and reactivation occurs, how understanding is possible (epistemology), must be grappled with within the context of an ontology which apprehends being in terms of crossing, or movement between. When the being of time and space, or history and the natural world, is found in the moment of their crossing, then there can be a structural philosophy (Husserl's goal) that begins to make out the landscape it is traversing, all the while recognizing the truth of alienation, or differentiation, or reversibility as a constraint on and condition for any reflection.

The way to come to this point is, as Merleau-Ponty pointed out in his lecture course on Nature, to begin with the ontology of nature, because it discloses the chiasm between the reflected and unreflective, both pointing the way to the fundamental notion of reversibility and showing that history, too, is incorporated into this pattern of relation by being that which nature touches, that into which it flows, the condition of nature's expression. The crossing of space and time is fundamental and a faithful thinking through of either nature or history requires thinking both of them together.

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